WALKER, JOHN H. MANUSCRIPTS SPEECHES

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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

John H. Walker

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Lincoln Centennial Association
Feb. 12, 1923.
John H. Walker.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, neighbors and fellow citizens:

I want to first express my appreciation of the honor conferred upon me in being invited to speak under the auspices of an organization composed of men who have, by their life's work, earned the standing in our country, that the members of the Lincoln Centennial Association have, and particularly to speak, representing labor, at the 114th anniversary of Lincoln's birth,- of the sayings, the works, and of the life of our former townsman.

It is fitting and appropriate that those who speak for labor, should render such recognition as they are capable of, of the great work done in their behalf, by him whom we are gathered here today to do honor to.

If there is one thing more than any other that can be said truthfully of Abraham Lincoln, it is, that he dealt with the realities, on the basis of truth and right. He not only agreed with the things that were right from an altruistic point of view, that had been done in the generations before, but he dealt with the problems of the day that were in process of solution, honestly, justly, with a depth of understanding, a clearness of insight, and a view of the future as no other person in his time did.

While being idealistic, he was at the same time intensely practical. He refused to permit the things that might be (that he wanted to be) to blind him in dealing with the conditions that were. He took that attitude because he felt that every act that was helpful, that made for progress, not only brought that much of betterment into the lives of the people, but gave them greater resources and opportunity, to make still further progress.

This rail-splitter, who sprung from the ranks of the common people (whom he loved so much) who became president of the United States of America, in the most trying period of our nation's history, is, without question, the greatest American who has ever lived. He struck the shackels from the black slaves, and in doing so, not only freed those of them who were slaves in the United States, but indirectly the influence of that act operated to free them everywhere. It also operated to give larger freedom to all the people of every race on earth. He lived for the betterment of oppressed and suffering humanity and gave himself day by day, all that was in him, to make the lot of man better.

The exploiters and oppressors of humanity abhorred and hated him. They crucified him,- and, were he living today carrying into effect, the doctrines which he taught during his life and to which he devoted his every effort, they of that element, would crucify him again. But, in the hearts of the common people of our day, he lives just as he did with the great mass of the people of our country at the time of his death. This is not alone true of these United States; it is true of every land where his history is known.

Were Lincoln living today, he would be standing for and supporting the labor movement, joint bargaining, the farmers and other co-operative societies, cleanliness and honesty in public life. He would be doing this in the interest of humanity,- they who in our nation are giving most to these causes are doing most towards carrying on the work that Abraham Lincoln was doing when his tragic death took him away.

His teachings and works inspired and encouraged the good men and women of his own time. They continue to move the men and women of our time to strive for higher ideals and to stand for those principles of freedom, justice and humanity which he taught and they will continue to stir the hearts and the souls of men and women for all time to carry on.

Abraham Lincoln said : "Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor and could not have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is superior to capital and deserves much the higher consideration." "No men living are more worthy to be trusted than those who toiled up from poverty". "Let them beware of surrendering political power." "No man is good enough to govern another without that other's consent".

Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor says of Lincoln: "And there emerged from poverty and obscurity a gaunt figure, the figure of Abraham Lincoln; the figure of a man whose spirit will live so long as there is hope in the hearts of men and in the minds of men to demand achievement and the maintenance of freedom, justice and democracy. "

"Lincoln lived for the attainment of these principles; Lincoln ~~lived~~ died in the struggle for these principles."

"Lincoln's spirit and high ideals dominate every movement of men and events which have for their purpose light and hope in the work and in the lives of the toiling masses of America, aye, of the whole world".

Lincoln's definition of the language of the Declaration of Independence (all men are created equal) is that every man is entitled to an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life.

In a letter to a Boston Club which had invited him to celebrate with them the birthday of Thomas Jefferson, Lincoln said his party believed in "the man and the dollar", but in case of conflict between them, it believed in "the man before the dollar".

In his speech in Cincinnati, in the year 1859 he said: "Labor is the great source from which nearly all, if not all, human comforts and necessities are drawn".

In the same speech he said: "The people of these United States are the rightful masters of both congresses and courts, not to overthrow the constitution, but to overthrow the men who pervert the constitution."

This indicates that even in his time there were men in high official position who, although sworn to uphold the law and constitution, in reality perverted it to serve their own personal purposes. He saw in them, the most sinister influence and menace to American government. It also indicates that he had entire confidence and faith in the people themselves to be able to govern themselves on the basis of American institutions. He believed in government by the law of the people, not by the edict, order or writ, of the individual.

One would almost think that with prophetic vision, while uttering those words, he could see in his mind the men who today are advocating as a substitute for our American institutions a government by injunction, the caprice or selfish designs of the individual, imposed on the masses, by military force. Wise men have all agreed that discretion is the law of the tyrant, and when exercised under the color of the law by one holding the position of a judge - doing it in the name of equity and good conscience - it usually becomes a terrible and insufferable despotism.

No one who has investigated the subject thoroughly, has any doubt but that Lincoln's statesmanship and genius were the determining influences in keeping the north united, in influencing Kentucky and some of the other southern states to take sides with the north, in keeping these states from becoming divided during the war, and had that not happened, it would have undoubtedly prolonged the war, encouraged other nations who were then almost openly supporting the south, in establishing slave conditions and would perhaps have resulted in the south's getting an agreement of separation which would have meant chattel slavery becoming a fixed and permanent institution.

The workers in the south who did not own land or who had no other means of making a livlihood for themselves, except in competition with slaves, either emigrated or degenerated into what was known as the southern "cracker" white trash, many of whom sunk to a level below that of the animal ,- and in some remote districts, they have not to this day, entirely recovered from this degradation. They became so degraded that the slave owners were able ~~to~~, by offering them a suit of clothes, a uniform and the food of a confederate soldier, to bribe them to fight to continue the cause of their own degradation (chattel slavery).

Lincoln's influence and his action in accomplishing this, saved all of the workers of our country from just that condition. Of course if he had not accomplished it, that would have meant another, and if one failed, then more bloody revolutions in which possibly millions of lives have been lost in the struggle for freedom. Then the slow, painful, laborious progress upwards again. Lincoln's greatest service was in behalf of the workers.

And, speaking from the point of view of the organized workers of our time, perhaps we can appreciate more keenly and more fully, his great service than can those of any other walk in life.

That this fact was pretty thoroughly understood even in his own time, is evidenced by the action of practically all the organized workers of the United States, Great Britain and Germany and other European countries. They seemed to be almost unanimously., supporting Lincoln and the north in that struggle for human liberty. Of course good men and women in every other walk of life who understood, supported them, but there were many who not only did not support Lincoln and the north, but who opposed them in every way and who contributed money and otherwise to defeat them in that crucial struggle.

A condition has developed since Lincoln's time which threatens the workers with worse than the original chattel slavery. It is not fully recognized yet by most people. It was beginning to develop just prior to Lincoln's death. That he had a reasonably comprehensive grasp of the situation is evidenced in the statement that he made with reference to it . He said: "Thank God we have a system of labor where there can be a strike! Whatever the pressure, there is a point where the workingman may stop". This new condition has been created largely through the modern development of industry which has brought about an equal strength in the units of the two sides of that problem.

The corporation, the unit of industry today equals an army of individual workmen. No one in any other aspect of life would expect individual working men or women as a unit, to test their strength with thousands and hundreds of thousands organized as one body, on the other side, effort has been and is being made to make it appear that the individual human being (as a worker) is equal to the unit (a corporation) on the other side, and powerful influences claiming to be good Americans are trying to compel him (the worker) to submit to that inequality in the bargaining and struggle of everyday life, for a livlihood for himself and his dependents.

No one has attempted (in reality) to prevent the corporations from organizing, federating and working together in almost any manner in dealing with their problems. They exercise the right to strike against the workingman (to withhold jobs from him whenever they see fit to do so). They exercise the right to boycott, to blacklist, and in addition to that, usually the men controlling these corporations have the advantage of education which the workmen have been denied, as well as material resources beyond that of the average worker.

As a result of the organized strength of the corporations, a condition has been created on the part of the workman (where he is compelled to act as an individual) in bargaining with those corporations, which in effect, is worse than the original chattel slavery. There is the difference that the individual workman has

physical freedom to come or go, but the lash of pressure of the needs of his family forces him at times, to submit to conditions more degrading and more onerous in the pursuit of a livlihood for himself and them, than that to which the chattel slave had to submit, or to which a self-respecting man would submit, at no matter what cost to himself personally.

The employer is absolved from the stigma of being a slave owner. He is also exempt from the responsibility that goes with that ownership. With the slave owner, there was also the incentive of self-interest, to keep his slave in good physical condition in order to raise and maintain his pecuniary value to the highest standard possible. That interest in the well being of his slave is also eliminated in this modern situation. Unless some adjustment takes place, that will give approximately equal strength to the worker in defending and promoting his standards of living, and his means of living for himself and family, in dealing with the men who own his means of life, it is likely to develop into a more serious condition for the worker generally than what chattel slavery meant to the slave, with all that that means on the part of human beings who will resent that sort of thing and who will strive by every means within their power, and at any cost, to free themselves from it.

We need in our public life today, men with the keen discriminating vision that Lincoln had to understand our problems; men with his broad gauged liberality of view; men with the hatred of wrong that he had; men with courage to stand for the right, with clear-sightedness and determination of purpose, that these questions may be solved in the right way, in the interest of humanity, as was that other great problem for the solution of which he gave so much.

Where he would stand on this question is made clear by his utterances in the debates between Lincoln and Douglas, on the subject of the extension of slavery, as set forth by Jesse W. Weik in his book "The Real Lincoln", quoting the debates and who heard Mr. Lincoln make the statement, he says: "It was during this canvass, with every fiber of his being tremulous with emotion, I heard him, in one of his speeches denouncing the extension of slavery, passionately exclaim: 'That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles - right and wrong - throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, "You toil and work and earn, bread and I'll eat it". No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.' The melting pathos with which Mr. Lincoln said this and its effect on his audience cannot be described."

The true greatness of Lincoln is proven most conclusively by the fact that his spirit is the greatest living influence in public life in our country today, and in the public life of every other country on the face of the earth where his history is known.

The things that he did; the things he said; the things he tried to do as a young man, working, playing and studying, as a business man, a lawyer, a friend, a lover - in political affairs; his judgment in reviewing the cases of the boys in the army who were sentenced to death; as commander-in-chief of the United States Army; as President of the United States; his tolerance and patience and great breadth of view; his kindliness (he was the friend of all the unfortunate);

his love of humanity; his forebearance; the complete absence of rankor and hatred; his intense desire to heal the wounds created by the war, to supplant the bitterness that had been created by it, with the desire for helpfulness; and when occasion required it, his firmness for that which was right; his determination; his persistence; his adamant hardness and great courage,- all that he did and all that he was, appeal so strongly to the good that is in every man and woman who comes to know him, that they become believers in and worshipers of him , desirous of not only doing honor to him, but in helping to further the work to which and for which, he gave his life. His like is sorely needed now to heal the wounds of a torn world!

Because Lincoln lived here amongst us,- because there is so much that touched his life surrounding us,- his home was here; he went back and forth amongst us here; he was married here; his children were born and reared here; here he was elected president, and his body lies here now - there is a great opportunity for us , through the example of his works, to do much good in this world. There is an equally large responsibility upon us to do that work. There is also the opportunity and obligation to acquaint ourselves with his life -- what he did -- what he was -- what he tried to do and through his example, to make better men and women of ourselves, to make better men and women throughout our entire nation and the world.

There are many shrines in this world at which the people worship, to their own betterment, and the betterment of humanity, but there is no shrine -- with the exception of that of the Redeemer himself, out of which could come so much of good for humanity now and in the future, than that which would come from his shrine properly prepared and kept by the people of this community.

May we men are up to that opportunity and obligation!

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"The feast of reason and the flow of soul"—Pope.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

May 30,

1922.

To Albert H. Griffith, Esq.,

Fisk,

Wisconsin.

Dear Sir:-

Replying to your letter of May 30th, we are not publishing in book form the addresses delivered at the Lincoln Memorial celebration, held here last February, and hence we will not be able to supply you with anything of that nature for your library.

Sincerely yours,

Elmer J. Kneale

Secretary.

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VICTOR A. OLANDER . SEC.-TREAS.
164-166 W. WASHINGTON ST., CHICAGO

February 27, 1923.

Mr. Albert H. Griffith,

Box 37, Fisk, Wis.

Dear Sir:

This is to acknowledge receipt of yours of the 19th. Have not had the statement I made before the Lincoln Centennial Association of the 114th anniversary of Abraham Loncoln's birthday printed, but expect in the course of time to have it typewritten, if not printed, and just as soon as I do so will send you a copy of it.

Yours very truly,

J H Walker

President.

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VICTOR A. OLANDER . SEC.-TREAS.
164-166 W. WASHINGTON ST., CHICAGO

429

March 20, 1923.

Mr. Albert H. Griffith,

Box 37,

Fisk, Wisconsin.

Dear Sir:

Further reference to your letter of recend date in which you requested a copy of the speech I made on "Abraham Lincoln", am enclosing copy of same.

Trusting that you can use it to suit your purpose, I am,

Yours very truly,

J H Walker

President.